

VZCZCXRO4831
RR RUEH DU RUEHJO RUEHMR
DE RUEHLG #0365 1160831
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 260831Z APR 06
FM AMEMBASSY LILONGWE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2675
INFO RUCNSAD/SOUTHERN AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0100
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0205
RUEHSB/AMEMBASSY HARARE 1306

UNCLAS LILONGWE 000365

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/S GABRIELLE MALLORY
STATE FOR INR/AA

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [MI](#)
SUBJECT: MUTARIKA QUELLS DEBATE ON MUGABE VISIT

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Malawian civil society organizations have recently criticized the GOM for inviting Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe to visit Malawi and open a new road, named after Mugabe himself. Local NGO leaders say Malawi should not name roads after human rights violators such as Mugabe. President Mutharika has privately tried to assuage the concerns of civil society and the diplomatic community, claiming that he will use the visit to quietly urge Mugabe to undertake reforms. However, Mutharika's numerous connections with Zimbabwe--including his Zimbabwean-national wife and large farm in the country--make it difficult to believe he will push Mugabe too much, if at all. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Mugabe is scheduled to visit Malawi from May 3-5, and the GOM plans to open the recently completed "Robert Mugabe Highway" in Southern Malawi during the visit. This would be the second road named after the president of Zimbabwe, which is home to roughly 3 million Zimbabweans of Malawian origin. Mutharika met with civil society leaders on April 24th to address their fears, capping off a vigorous government public information campaign of press statements and paid ads to defend Mugabe's visit.

¶3. (SBU) According to NGO reps who participated in the meeting, Mutharika said he would speak with Mugabe, and ask him not to use the visit as a platform to speak out against the West--a major concern of civil society (due to their stated fears that the visit might affect donor funding in Malawi). Mutharika also agreed to try and set up a meeting between representatives from women's organizations and Mugabe, so that the organizations could voice their concerns to Mugabe directly. Finally, Mutharika agreed to develop a statute outlining the process for honoring important leaders, which was a suggestion of the delegation. For their part, the civil society groups in attendance agreed to cancel planned demonstrations during the visit, and to back off their concerns over naming the road after President Mugabe.

¶4. (U) Mutharika has long-standing ties to Mugabe, and Zimbabwe in general. His wife, Ethel Mutharika, is a Zimbabwean citizen. He also owns a large farm in Zimbabwe, to which he often travels during holidays. Mutharika and Mugabe's relationship is particularly close, and the Malawian press often refers to Mugabe as Mutharika's "uncle". These personal ties, along with the large number of "Malawians" living in Zimbabwe, seem to be Mutharika's motivation for inviting, and honoring, Mugabe.

¶5. (SBU) Comment: Mutharika's meeting, following up full page ads and op-eds by government spokesmen in local papers, shows just how focused the GOM is on making sure Mugabe's visit goes smoothly. Yet while Mutharika has privately assured

diplomatic community members and NGOs that Mugabe's visit will be kept in control, it is difficult to believe that Mugabe won't use the opportunity to yet again take a swing at the international community. Mutharika's promise of a meeting between Mugabe and the NGO community also seems fairly unlikely to take place, as Mugabe himself would have to sign off on such an event. Regardless, it seems as if government is set on naming the road after Mugabe, while hoping to keep civil society quiet throughout the visit.

EASTHAM